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Balzac, Literary Sociologist (book review)

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Pasco, Allan H. *Balzac, Literary Sociologist*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-3-319-39332-2. Pp. 290.

This volume presents Balzac as a trailblazing proto-sociologist who documented in his *Scènes de la vie de province* a radically-changed France transformed by the noxious atmosphere of the Restoration and July Monarchy. Although Balzac wrote "fiction," he believed he was writing the kind of cultural history that we would today call sociology (vii). He was interested in the web of connections forming a new society from the enduring chaos of the French Revolution, Napoleon's wars, and the Industrial Revolution. Convinced that the motivating force was money, whether coin, banknotes, bonds, debt, credit, land, or other forms of wealth, he illustrated the results of the social pressures and activity inspired by the pursuit of such assets in various relationships between church, state, and family, thus documenting France's painful shift from an agricultural to a capitalistic society. Comprised of twelve chapters including an introduction and a conclusion, each of the ten interior chapters treats a different volume of the *Scènes de la vie de province* following the order of the novels projected in *La comédie humaine*. This section is important, since it contains ten of Balzac's best (yet under-studied) novels written during the pinnacle of his literary form (the 1830s and 1840s), while introducing many of his most salient themes: the regrettable rise of journalism, the weakening of the church, the loss of fathers to war and the resulting decline of the traditional family, the decay of the nobility and the rise of the bourgeoisie, the advent of a gerontocracy that clings to power while squelching the ambitions of the youth, and the constant transferal of people, ideas, and capital between Paris and the provinces. *Ursule Mirouët* (1841) suggests that all nuclear families are slowly dying, due to war or social breakdown. *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) emphasizes the differences between genuine Christian faith as embodied in Eugénie and the monstrous perversion represented by her father. *Pierrette* (1840) and *La vieille fille* (1837) treat the dark side of society's demographics—the young are being crushed by the venal gerontocracy. *Le curé de Tours* (1832) is a powerful mock-heroic drama casting light on the ineffective ridiculousness of Charles X's France. *La rabouilleuse* (1842) underlines the lack of fathers while employing an innovative narration composed of a moving target where the wealth (in the case, the inheritance) serves as the point of focus. *L'illustre Gaudissart* (1833) highlights one of the most vital aspects of the period's nascent capitalism: the financial system could not be confined to urban

centers. The provinces had to be stimulated to take part. Both *La muse du département* (1837) and *Illusions perdues* (1843) show the degree to which journalism, however much Balzac despised it, was changing society, while *Le cabinet des antiques* (1838) offers a scathing critique of the waning provincial nobility and the post-Revolutionary system of justice. Eminently readable, this landmark publication shows like no other how Balzac used art as a tool of social inquiry to obtain startlingly accurate and relevant insights into his turbulent society and our own.

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